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ABSTRACT

In order to examine the gap between Asian American over-representation in higher education and their under-representation in leadership positions in United States society, this study examined leadership in a Japanese American college student organization, the "Tomo No Kai (Tomo)." In particular it examined the role of personal qualities, cultural values, and generational status in students' conceptions and practice of leadership. The study used a qualitative approach with data collected primarily through naturalistic observation techniques and interviews. The study included observation of various meetings and activities of the group and surveys of and semi-structured interviews with a selected sub-set of nine participants. Data analysis revealed that the organizational context of Tomo was bounded by students' reasons for joining the club, which was often to establish their own ethnic identity. According to participants, effective leadership was caring and nurturing, yet also hierarchical, a model with strong roots in Japanese-American culture. Interestingly, few Tomo members were involved in activities aimed at the student population as a whole, raising the question of whether these ethnic organizations hamper students' progress in the wider societal context. Includes a copy of the survey. (Contains 23 references.) (JB)

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ED 391 426

# The Role of Ethnicity in Conceptualizing and Practicing Leadership in a Japanese-American Student Organization

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## INTRODUCTION

Few topics in contemporary Asian-American history have attracted as much attention as the meteoric rise in the number of Asian-descent students in this nation's educational system, particularly at the college level. While white enrollment grew five percent from 1976 to 1982, Asian-American numbers rose 62 percent (Takagi, 1992). In the twelve years following, Asian-American enrollment nearly doubled to 697,000 students, or approximately five percent of the total undergraduate population (Chronicle of Higher Education, 1994). According to 1990 Census data, people of Asian descent comprise 2.9 percent of the total U.S. population (Chronicle of Higher Education, 1994). While Asian Americans clearly remain a racial minority in the U.S., the data support the assertion that this group is "over-represented"[1] in higher education.

In the U.S., college attendance historically has been linked with cognitive and social development, increased career opportunities, and access to many societal privileges (Astin, 1993; Hearn, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Frequently, college mission statements also have included the goal of training society's future leaders (Morrill & Roush, 1991). Given this focus, it seems reasonable to conclude that some of the Asian-American students passing through the halls of this nation's colleges and universities should emerge as societal leaders in their post-baccalaureate years. Evidence indicates otherwise, at least upon examination of the traditional venues.

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[1] This phrase conveys the notion that parity is the desirable level of ethnic/racial group representation. Under such conditions, the representation of Asian Americans in higher education should mirror the group's proportion in the overall population. Anything less would connote "under-representation," while anything more is labeled "over-representation." This paper is not advocating the use of such parity-based criteria. However, since this belief system often influences college admission policies as well as the larger affirmative action debate,the phrase is used here.

The surge of Asian-American students in higher education has not been matched by a concomitant increase among faculty or administrators (Escueta and O'Brien, 1991). Likewise, Asian Americans rarely occupy the upper rungs of America's corporate ladders or the country's political offices, even in a state such as California where they comprise nearly ten percent of the population. Census figures from 1990 indicate that whites held 75.3 percent of managerial and professional jobs in California while Asians held slightly more than nine percent of managerial jobs (Decker, 1995). Of California's 96 legislative seats, only one Asian American currently holds such a post (Green, Chance, Richardson, Rodriguez & Smith, 1994). Compared to the "over-representation" of Asian Americans in higher education that began to emerge in the 1970s, these figures indicate persistent under-representation in leadership positions within the larger societal context.

The underlying causes of the loose coupling between higher education and leadership for Asian Americans are no doubt complex. Structural barriers, discrimination, and self-selection out of the competition for positions are some possible explanations. Another is that Asian-American leaders may primarily be serving in positions within their own ethnic communities or in pan-Asian organizations, rather than in traditional, mainstream forums. These possible scenarios raise several questions regarding the gap between Asian Americans' over-representation as students and under-representation as societal leaders. Among them are: Do Asian-American students benefit from the leadership development goals espoused within higher education? What constitutes their collegiate leadership experiences?

To examine these problems, this study began with three guiding questions: 1) What qualities, skills, and behaviors do Asian-American students associate with leadership? 2) How are their cultural values, norms, beliefs, or expectations related to their leadership practice? and 3) What role does generational status (i.e. generation in the U.S.) play in their conceptions and practice of leadership? Through the course of the investigation, it became clear that in order to answer these questions, the more basic question of, "What is the nature of leadership in an Asian-American student organization?" had to be addressed first. Therefore, this broader question guided the primary line of inquiry and analysis.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

While the questions posed above have not adequately been addressed by previous research in a single field, selected literature from several areas does provide a framework for the study. These works are reviewed briefly here.

### Leadership

Leadership is one of the most frequently studied yet problematic fields of inquiry. Thousands of books, articles, and seminars propose effective leadership styles and offer theories or models. As conceptual explanations of leadership evolved from a focus on personal characteristics to transactional, transformational, or contingency models, the role of situational variables were given more consideration (Bensimon, Neumann, and Birnbaum, 1989). Recent literature in the field has begun to address the role of gender, organizational culture, and other contextual variables on leaders and their styles.

Despite the progress of research into these areas, analyses of how leadership is defined by culturally diverse peoples does not exist. What is known about African-American, Asian-American, Latino, Native American and other leaders of color comes from the management literature. These studies often address the "glass ceiling" faced by women and people of color in corporate America (Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990). They do not address the more fundamental issue of how the cultural context of these individuals' backgrounds influences conceptualization of leaders and leadership.

As organizations attempt to serve increasingly multicultural constituents by recruiting or training leaders of color, it is not enough to follow equal opportunity hiring goals. Such policy is hollow if unaccompanied by an understanding of differences in behavior, values, experiences, and expectations among multicultural leaders. Without this level of understanding, stereotypes of Asian Americans as being unassertive or other negative attributions cannot be eradicated. An empirical understanding of the role of ethnicity can propel future leadership training and education to have practical effects.

This need is particularly strong in colleges and universities where leadership development is a growing field. However, studying leadership as an outcome of college presents numerous difficulties and is further complicated when considering issues such as ethnicity, race, and consequent experiences of marginalization. Discussion of these factors is conspicuously lacking in the student development literature. According to Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) synthesis of student development literature, race is addressed only nominally as a pre-college characteristic by some researchers. Generally, the tendency has been to ignore the role of race, ethnicity, or culture on student development. While the

college experience does have a positive impact on students' self-ratings of leadership ability (Astin, 1993). Fuertes and Sedlacek (1993) contend that Latinos and other non-traditional students continue to face barriers on campus. They suggest programmatic changes in leadership development programs which take students' ethnicity into account.

## Ethnicity and Ethnic Adaptation

Ethnicity is central to this study because it functions as a lens through which conceptions and practices of leadership are filtered. Yancey, Eriksen, and Leon (1985) equate the term "ethnicity" with ethnic groups whose members share mutual traits, associate with one another, and are characterized by common historical conditions. Mindel, Habenstein, and Wright (1988) pursue a similar logic by identifying the components of ethnicity as values, attitudes, lifestyles, customs, rituals and personality types; ethnic group members are said to share a unique social and cultural heritage.

Omi and Winant (1986) assert that ethnicity is a culturally constructed concept based on common cultural elements including religion, language, customs, and nationality. This is contrasted to race, which they present as a socially and politically constructed concept often used interchangeably with ethnicity, albeit misguidedly. Given the cultural underpinnings of ethnicity, Asian Americans' cultural context is included in the term "ethnicity" for this study.

Omi and Winant discuss ethnicity-based theories further and identify the polar ends of the debate as assimilation and cultural pluralism. Both reflect an overly dualistic, zero-sum orientation indicating two mutually exclusive processes. More recent research has presented alternative theories. In a study of Korean immigrants, Kim and Hurh (1993)

assert that considering assimilation and ethnic attachment as mutually exclusive processes distorts our understanding of how adaptation actually transpires. They propose a conceptual model which identifies five possible adaptive response patterns: 1) *Replacement* is akin to traditional notions of assimilation. Over time, immigrants' ethnic attachment is weakened or lost and they become more "Americanized." 2) *Addition* involves maintaining significant portions of ethnic lifestyles while adding elements of the dominant culture such as language or food. The key difference is that "Americanization" does not weaken attachment to traditional culture. 3) *Blending* refers to the creation of a new hybrid lifestyle than encompasses elements of both cultures. 4) *Attachment* or ethnic maintenance describes the mode of adaptation by which immigrants retain and reinforce their ethnic ties to the exclusion of American influences. And finally, 5) *Marginalization* results when minimal ethnic attachment is maintained yet there is no acceptance of the dominant culture either (p. 700).

The adaptive response patterns described above present a continuum of possibilities; they are not either/or models. In fact, Kim & Hurh (1993) found that Korean immigrants maintained close ties with their ethnic group regardless of their length of residence in the United States. Exclusive or extensive involvement with mono-ethnic organizations therefore can affect conceptualizations of leadership among immigrants and their descendants. As Yancey, et. al. (1985) assert, "The impact of ethnicity on behaviors and attitudes increases for those with homogenous networks," (p.110).

In Fugita and O'Brien's (1991) work on Japanese Americans in California, data also demonstrate the impact of ethnic cohesion. They attribute the persistence of

Japanese-American ethnicity to individuals' high level of participation in their ethnic community. This results in a strong sense of peoplehood which encompasses all members of their ethnic group as "quasi-kin," (p. 5). The central thesis of their book is based on the structure of these relationships within the Japanese-American community: "the key elements ... are not language, religion, or other aspects of ethnicity (and acculturation), but rather a set of guidelines for structuring social relationships" even though they have structurally assimilated on a wide scale into the dominant culture (p. 27). Therefore, ethnicity is retained essentially through social interaction with co-ethnics.

## Asian-American Culture

These ethnic social structures are governed largely by a shared culture. Therefore, identification of culturally valued leadership styles and practices would enhance our understanding of Asian-American leaders. Looking specifically at the Japanese-American culture, Fugita and O'Brien (1991) assert that the concept of leadership in that culture is quite different in comparison to mainstream American society, particularly with regard to their emphasis on modesty and self-effacement. They state:

> This kind of behavior, however, is likely to be interpreted by majority group individuals as showing a lack of leadership qualities. In meetings with Caucasians, Japanese American reticence and verbal modesty is sometimes perceived by core culture individuals as being quiet to the point of rudeness. (p. 176)

Furthermore, Fugita and O'Brien report the tendency for Japanese-American organizations to collectively force capable individuals into leadership positions ( p. 176). Such unsolicited leadership responsibility may be considered a burden by some. However, Fugita and O`Brien argue that Japanese Americans view this as an expected cost when they join groups. Furthermore, they assert that this sacrifice is outweighed by the

psychological benefits of maintaining social relationships with their ethnic community. These bonds of ethnic identification appear to be of paramount value.

The roots of such cohesive group behavior among Japanese Americans can be traced to Japanese cultural norms. Nakane (in Kitano & Kikumura, 1980) provides a model of Japanese social structure to assist in understanding the influence of culture on behavior. In Japanese society, people tend to identify with one institution (e.g. their employer, university, or family) which provides a "frame" or structure for their lives. It shapes their individual identities as well as a strong group conscience: "Group control of behavior extends into shaping ideas and behaviors" (p. 6). Individuality and creativity would therefore not be valued if these qualities generate behavior that deviates from group norms. To what extent the "frame" structure impacts Asian Americans remains to be seen.

The literature reviewed here supports this study's underlying assumption that the degree of ethnic influence on students likely is affected by their own level of ethnic adaptation as well as their parents'. Furthermore, ethnicity should be considered a dynamic, rather than static, characteristic. Thus, I expected students' ethnic identification and leadership practices to move along a continuum, ranging from highly ethnic to mainstream American. In between is a range of *blended* ethnicity described earlier (Kim & Hurh, 1993). Leadership practices and beliefs laying in this portion of the continuum reflect a hybrid of cultural values and norms; they are neither American nor Asian, but Asian American. The cultural values, expectations, and norms of both their ancestors and their country of residence have been appropriated to suit their unique position as Asian-

American student leaders. Thus, depending on the organizational context, goals, and expectations placed upon the leaders, the nature of their leadership will evolve.

## SITE DESCRIPTION AND PARTICIPANTS

The Asian-American population is a heterogeneous one comprised of individuals with ancestors from numerous countries. Because of their diverse languages, histories, and cultures, studying Asian Americans as a monolithic group clouds vital inter-ethnic variations. Thus, I examined only one ethnic group in this study: Japanese Americans.

Of the Asian-American subpopulations, Japanese Americans have one of the longest histories in the U.S. Relative to other Asian-American groups, there is a sizable body of literature regarding the norms, values, and behaviors of Japanese-American culture. They also are considered the most assimilated by virtue of a high out-marriage rate (i.e. spouses are not of Japanese ancestry); residential dispersion (i.e. most Japanese Americans do not live in their own ethnic neighborhoods), and relatively high levels of socioeconomic attainment (Kitano, 1988). I contend that if ethnicity influences the conceptualizations and practice of leadership among Japanese-American students, then the effects are likely to be even more pronounced among students from other Asian groups which have shorter collective histories in the U.S.

Study participants were students in a Japanese-American club at a large public university. These individuals had made a conscious decision to participate in a traditionally mono-ethnic organization, the *Tomo No Kai* (*Tomo*) club. The primary purpose of the club is to meet the social and cultural needs of its participants. Literally translated "association of friends," *Tomo No Kai* also is a forum for students to learn

about their Japanese culture which typically has not been passed down from their grandparents and parents. Members who possess cultural knowledge are few in number but central to the club's existence.

While all *Tomo* members are not Japanese American, a significant majority is. This creates an environment in which Japanese and/or Japanese-American values, customs, traditions, and norms tend to emerge. Whether it be the inter-mingling of Japanese words and phrases into their speech, eating Japanese food, or knowing to approach the Manzanar internment memorial in silence, the implicit understanding of a shared heritage runs strong.

Approximately 40 members regularly attend the weekly meetings held Thursday evenings in the Cross Cultural Center ("the Cross"). The formal leadership of *Tomo* consists of eleven cabinet members who are elected in the spring quarter for the following academic year. For 1994-95, there are seven women and four men on cabinet. The women hold the positions of president, social vice president, public relations vice president, secretary, historian, and the two publicity positions. The cultural vice president, *taiko* (i.e. Japanese drum corps) director, treasurer, and the second historian are men. Given that *Tomo* is primarily a Japanese club, the ethnic composition of its current cabinet is unusual. Five members are Chinese or Taiwanese, and a sixth is of mixed Chinese and Japanese heritage; the other five are Japanese American.

While many dances, social outings, and community service projects take place throughout the year, significant time is devoted to the annual Cultural Night (CN) production. This impressive event, which I examined as a critical incident in the life of the organization, stirs up a heightened sense of ethnic awareness among club participants in

the immediately preceding weeks. This created an ideal setting for an investigation of ethnic and cultural influences on leadership notions and practices. Against the backdrop of CN preparations, ethnically defined behaviors were more likely to emerge. However, as demonstrated by the show's acts, this certainly does not negate the influence of the dominant culture since these participants are Asian *American*.

## METHODOLOGY

The specific questions put forth in this study address the role of students' ethnicity in their conceptions and practice of leadership. Even separately, leadership and ethnicity pose challenges to researchers because of multiple meanings attributed to the two concepts. Therefore, I selected a qualitative approach which allowed for the participants' social reality to emerge through the data. Since one of my primary goals was to understand how these students conceptualized leadership, giving voice to their understandings was requisite. As Geertz (1973) notes, qualitative research allows for a rich, "thick description" of people and events. Thus, this mode of inquiry was suited for the study of the complex circumstances and meanings surrounding leadership.

Additionally, I was interested in students' leadership practices, so the aspect of qualitative research which allows investigators to examine phenomena in naturally-occurring settings (Yin, 1989) was appropriate for this study. Therefore, naturalistic observation techniques and interviews were used as the primary modes of data collection.

I attended various meetings and activities of the group as a participant observer during the spring 1995 academic term. The primary task during these visits was to record student leadership practices, to develop an understanding of the organizational context,

and to develop rapport with participants by engaging in informal interviews. Semi-structured interviews with a selected sub-set of participants (six current cabinet members, two former cabinet members, and one first-year member) also were conducted during this time period. The hour-long interviews focused on three general topics: (1) students' ethnic identity, (2) their peer group, and (3) leadership. The first two areas were probed to garner data on participants' ethnicity and the extent of homogeneity within their social networks, a condition which Yancey, et. al. (1985) identify as influential on behaviors and attitudes. And finally, the broad area of leadership was probed as the primary focus.

Another aspect of qualitative research suited to this study was the use of an interpretive framework which recognizes the multiple realities of participants (Levine, 1995). Given that conceptions and practices of leadership among Asian Americans are little understood phenomena, documenting participants' multiple perspectives was necessary. More than other analytic tools, qualitative inquiry emphasizes the need to record social experience as it holds meaning for the participant (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

By interacting with and observing the participants, I served the dual role of researcher and primary data-collection instrument. I accomplished this by maintaining extensive field notes in addition to tape recording and transcribing. A brief survey instrument administered to each participant prior to the interview provided background information (see Appendix A for instrument). All data were coded and categorized into themes for analysis. The five major categories are detailed in the following section. As a first-generation Japanese-American researcher, I brought to the study my own understanding of ethnicity and culture. Because of this background, issues of subjectivity

and bias were monitored through memos and journaling. While the research presented here is not devoid of my personal biases, the analyses are drawn straight from the data.

Only six of the cabinet members (representing both Japanese American and non) were selected for in-depth interviewing because of the limited time and resources available to conduct the study. They were the president, public relations VP, secretary, cultural VP, treasurer, and the male historian. To garner a wider perspective about leadership within the *Tomo* context, two previous cabinet members and a current club member also were selected as interview participants. See Table 1.

**Table 1. Participant Profiles**

| Participant Position | Ethnicity | Generation in U.S. |
|---|---|---|
| President | Japanese American | Third |
| Cultural VP | Japanese American | Second |
| Public Relations VP | Japanese American | Fourth |
| Treasurer | Chinese American | Second |
| Historian | Chinese/Japanese Am. | Fifth |
| Secretary | Taiwanese | First |
| Former President | Japanese American | Fourth |
| Former P.R. VP | Japanese American | Second* |
| Member | Japanese American | Fourth |

* Participant has been categorized as "second" although father is first generation and mother is second generation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

By examining *Tomo* in the context of Cultural Night preparations, it became evident that its student leadership styles are dynamic and contextual. Some notions and practices reflect traditional, hierarchical aspects of leadership while others are more egalitarian. Also, depending on the particular roles and expectations placed on the leaders, the nature of their leadership reflects different aspects of ethnic values. These

findings are presented here by focusing on the five over-arching analytical themes which emerged from the data: 1) the organizational context of *Tomo*, 2) participants' definitions of leaders, 3) the phenomenon of unsolicited leadership, 4) maintenance of group consensus, and 5) cultivation of ethnic community networks.

## Organizational Context

*Tomo*'s creative and physical energies were consumed during the period of data collection by preparations for their ninth annual Cultural Night (CN) entitled, "Worlds Apart but of One Heart." Over 400 people crowded into the auditorium on the night of the show for an evening of entertainment and examination of what it means for these students to be Japanese American. An arch of red and white helium-filled balloons representing the colors of the Japanese national flag crowned the stage. Excitement pervaded the atmosphere as cast members mingled in the audience and people waved across the room to those they recognized. The CN production itself was framed by a three-part skit with scenes entitled "*Sansei,*" "*Nisei,*" and "*Issei*" (i.e. third, second, and first generation) and featured hip-hop dancing, traditional Japanese folk dancing, *taiko* drumming, and a raffle drawing.

Cultural Night's blending of Asian and American elements captured the essence of these students' lives which are spent negotiating their ethnic identity. For them, it is as natural to don black high-top sneakers and dance to rap music as it is to tie on a headband and create passionate drumbeats in the manner of their ancestors. CN reflects the unique reality that while the various cultural influences may seemingly be "worlds apart," they often are fused together in the lives of these students.

As a student organization, *Tomo* not only serves as the context in which leadership is enacted but also reflects the cultural and group values which influence leadership practice. The expectation to produce a Cultural Night each year demonstrates the reciprocal influence of context, leadership, and ethnicity on one another. For example, it is a highly-valued goal and a shared expectation among members of the organization to produce CN each year. Typically, this goal is nested in students' ethnic identity development as illustrated in this year's skit which focused on a third-generation college students' search for his "Japanese side" while on a study abroad program to Japan. It is the responsibility of the Cultural VP to select a CN committee whose task is to create a production reflecting *Tomo* members' culture and ethnicity. The leaders' work is directly linked with reaching this goal, which is by definition cultural.

Other examples of the CN context functioning as a space in which leadership practices became coupled with ethnic values were evident. Several committee heads served as teachers by training cast members in traditional Japanese dancing, *taiko*, Japanese dialog for the skit, and *origami* paper folding. Takeshi[2], the cultural vice president, was the cultural sage because of his frequent travels to Japan, bilingual skills, and intimate knowledge of both Japanese and Japanese-American history. He indicated, "One's own understanding of Japanese culture cannot come from others, but from one's own experience with it." His desire was to nurture a CN environment in which each participant could achieve this understanding.

Although much of the leaders' behavior during the period under investigation was situated in Cultural Night preparations, the club's general meetings and cabinet meetings

[2] Names of all participants have been changed to pseudonyms.

still functioned as integral components of the organizational context. Weekly general meetings maintained a formal structure with members sitting in rows of chairs facing a lectern and dry-erase board. These two objects clearly emerged as symbols of leadership and authority. Emi, the president, began each meeting by stepping behind the lectern. She then turned to the agenda items she had carefully written on the dry-erase board. Her voice and demeanor took on a noticeably different tone as she switched into her presidential character and began, "O.K. people..." Each guest or cabinet member making announcements was called to the lectern by Emi, at which time she stepped aside or often sat on the ground, watching and listening as any other member would. Only at the final meeting before Cultural Night did Emi forgo the lectern and run her brief meeting standing in the center of the room. On this night and at the meetings when Takeshi had control over the dry-erase board, Emi's facilitation of the proceedings was a mere formality.

By utilizing these symbols of authority, Emi, Takeshi, and others signaled to the group that they were the appointed leaders. While facilitating these weekly meetings constitutes a small portion of their responsibilities, it is vital for cabinet members to fulfill the expectations that *Tomo* members have. The members rely on the cabinet, and in particular the president, to keep them informed and connected.

A sharp contrast to the uneventful general meetings were the cabinet meetings which took place at cabinet members' apartments. Upon entering, everyone automatically took off their shoes according to Japanese custom. And unlike the rigid seating structure at "the Cross," cabinet members sat or lay on the ground in a circle for these meetings. Japanese phrases were used frequently despite the fact that not all the cabinet was

Japanese. While the cabinet positions are open to students of all ethnic backgrounds as is the club, this behavior of the leaders conveyed an implicit understanding that it is still a Japanese-American organization. The leaders of Japanese descent apparently do not find it necessary to be inclusive in their language; there is an unexpressed belief that the non-Japanese should adapt by acquiring knowledge of common phrases. Or they will be unable to fully participate, as shown during a discussion about ordering refreshments for Cultural Night. The secretary Janis who is Taiwanese finally asked what *ocha* was after several others debated whether or not to serve it. "It's tea!" several of them responded, as if Janis should have known.

Nonetheless, the good-natured bantering intermixed with club business revealed that strong friendships existed in the group. Among the cabinet members, three of the men were roommates as were two of the women, and there were two dating couples. While the partners never sat together or physically touched during general meetings, they comfortably leaned against each other and acted like couples in the context of cabinet meetings. These behaviors, along with cabinet members' other antics such as mock wrestling matches, clearly delineated the boundary of what is acceptable in this context that is not in others.

## Definitions of Leadership

Not only did the leadership contexts vary within *Tomo*, but members' definitions of leadership did as well. A variety of probes in the semi-structured interviews were employed to elicit participants' definitions about leaders and leadership, and whether or not they considered themselves to be leaders. "Although I'm on cabinet, I wouldn't really

call myself a leader because no one really follows me," shared Alan, the historian. The public relations VP, Michele, commented:

> Once I accept a position, I'm going to do my job. And if it happens to be a leadership role, then I'll do it. But I don't think I'm naturally the type of person that is like the center of attention or that will actually be the leader.

These two cabinet members offered definitions of leadership which imply followership and centrality of function. These notions are congruent with hierarchical perspectives which associate leadership with designated positions.

An even more authoritarian perspective was expressed by Janis, the secretary:

> You need to be able to separate yourself from your members. You need to be able to, I guess, having control is really important. There are people that I know that have taken on leadership positions and haven't done well and I think a lot of it has to do with whether they can be mean sometimes. And be like, "I need this done and I need it done now." Rather than like, "You know, can you do this for me?" You have to be stern and you have to show whoever is under you that here is [*sic*] the things we have to get done. I think that's really important.

But later she added, "They [leaders] are people who are dedicated and caring for the club." While being stern and caring appears contradictory at first, these qualities connote a parental attitude. While parent-child relationships in Japanese and most Asian cultures are hierarchical in nature, the mother or father's actions keep the family's best interest (not their own) in mind. Janis' definitions of leadership reflect this commitment to the group which is a surrogate family for many students.

The nurturing dimension of leadership, which also could be construed as a familial aspect, was raised by public relations vice president Michele: "She [her predecessor] kept me under her wing and always asked how things were going." Cabinet members also take on two or three freshmen members each year as "lil siblings." The current secretary fondly

remembers her big sister dropping off care packages during finals last year. "It's nice to know someone cares," she said.

While playing the parental or older sibling role is valued by some members, others prefer more egalitarian practices. Ellen, a former cabinet member, spoke with frustration about the president she served with:

> She [the president] seemed not to take her job as president very seriously. She seemed very disorganized and that drove me crazy. She didn't seem to have any goals for the club. Plus, it seemed as if she was only running the club for herself and not the members.

From Ellen's perspective, group goals and needs should guide the president's actions. Leadership is not about being a lone ranger. Such self-centered actions accompanied by poor organizational skills caused Ellen to perceive the president, Meg, as ineffective. Interestingly, Meg's good friend Mayumi also served on cabinet and asserts, "She [Meg] brought us to new places. When she became president, she had a lot of aspirations as far as where she wanted to take *Tomo* and what she wanted to do."

Mayumi and Ellen offer divergent interpretations of this past president's leadership style and practice. On one hand Meg appears as an admired visionary; on the other, she is portrayed as ineffective and self-absorbed. More than anything, the voices of Mayumi and Ellen reflect differing reactions to organizational change instituted by a leader.

The current president, Emi, communicated leadership values which are closely aligned with Ellen's emphasis on the need for collaboration:

> A lot of people see leadership as an individual position. But to me, teamwork is an essential part of it, at least in all the positions I've held. If you're always an individual, it's never going to happen. It's never going to come together.

When Ellen was president last year, she practiced cooperative leadership behavior whenever possible. She initiated a brainstorming session at her first cabinet meeting to set the group's goals for the year. She kept the list and referred to it for guidance during her tenure as president. Also, Ellen tried to combat the tendency of some members to sit on the floor during weekly meetings because she believed they would be excluded from group interactions. Stressing her desire for everyone to be on a symbolically equal level, she attempted to have everyone seated in chairs for the meetings.

Casual conversations also elicited various descriptions of leaders. A freshman member concluded, "I think most important is their ability to work together. To not only have fun together, but also to take care of business." A current cabinet member stated:

> Emi is a good leader. I just look at her and she's got so many people that she knows from the fraternities or from the Pilipino club. She's like born, no not a born leader, but she knows what to do. I guess in some sense everyone on cabinet is a leader. Takeshi's a really good leader. He's delegating a lot. I think if we're all given that chance to step up we will do so.

Others echoed the importance of networks and connections. Also, assuming responsibility and stepping up to the task were recurrent themes in participants' definitions of leadership.

Compared to these latter definitions of leadership which value collaboration and egalitarianism, the earlier descriptions of authoritarian leaders stand out as being hierarchical. However, the cultural underpinnings cannot be divorced from the definitions. As Fugita and O'Brien's (1991) indicate, social structures influenced by Japanese culture pay "an inordinate amount of attention to norms about interpersonal relationships, especially those concerned with the obligations of specific roles and statuses" (p. 37).

Therefore, rather than simply reflecting a top-down hierarchy, the strict adherence to roles also reveals culturally influenced leadership styles.

## Unsolicited Leadership

One result of the interplay between obligation, status, and roles is the election of individuals to *Tomo* cabinet positions who were not necessarily seeking leadership opportunities. They are unsolicited leaders. Fugita and O'Brien (1991) described the common practice in Japanese-American volunteer organizations to collectively force capable individuals into leadership positions. As noted earlier, this process is anticipated by members when they join groups; it is a small price to pay given the benefits of maintaining social relationships with their ethnic community.

Within the context of *Tomo*, the implicit understanding is that if one stays involved, one eventually will be asked to consider holding a cabinet position. As a cabinet member phrased it, the club is like a family-run business where everyone who cares about the long-term viability of the organization pitches in to help. In the process of selecting leaders, Cultural Night marks the beginning of recruiting season. The treasurer explains:

> I guess we're trying to see that if people stick around for Cultural Night and through that hell, then I guess it would mean they're qualified or ready to actually take on that responsibility. We want people who will go through *Tomo* through thick and thin.

Individuals do not necessarily have to demonstrate leadership ability. Commitment to the group and perseverance are the requisite qualifications. Becoming a cabinet member represents the ultimate display of loyalty and sense of obligation to *Tomo*. This is not to say the cabinet members are reluctant leaders. But as informants stated, most of them were not seeking leadership positions; they simply wanted to give back to the group.

Under these conditions, being elected to a cabinet position does not represent an opportunity to exercise individual power or to seek self-glory. Instead, the modesty and self-effacement described by Fugita and O'Brien (1991) as characteristic of Japanese-American leaders prevails. One cabinet member described the election process:

> The thing about our elections is that no one really nominated themselves. I guess that would be, I don't know... I guess everyone was pretty modest about it. I wanted to be on cabinet, but I would never over-step my boundaries. Like if I were elected for president, I never would take it. First of all I'm Chinese. And it's just too much of a position to allot to a sophomore. To be honest, I didn't really care about my position. I liked *Tomo* and I figured I was going to stick around and I wanted to help the club.

Given the reluctance of members to nominate themselves for positions, it would seem difficult to assemble a ballot of candidates. But a senior in the group explained:

> Not when you have someone like her [pointing to the historian] around. She just looks around the room and goes, "I nominate her and her and him and him..." And once their names are on the board, they start to think, "Yeah, I think I can do it." That's how it works.

There are no speeches or solicitation of votes, unlike the campus-wide elections for student government officers. In the words of Sheldon, the treasurer:

> It wasn't a competition for leadership. We were just asked to do certain things and we accepted. It's not like you're trying to assert yourself as a leader to begin with. You just seemed to have the qualities so you were elected to the position. It's not a competition thing where people were fighting to become president.

Many of these students wanted to serve the organization and to contribute their time; but they did not self-nominate because such an action would contradict the accepted group norm. Therefore, unlike the traditional procedure of running for student office, the cabinet members stepped in to fulfill leadership roles which they did not solicit or seek themselves.

## Valuing Group Consensus and Harmony

The phenomenon of unsolicited leadership and the organizational culture which fosters it is indicative of a broader cultural value: maintaining group consensus and harmony. Adherence to specific leadership roles and recognizing status differentials between senior members and newcomers are other aspects of this value. Fugita and O'Brien (1991) maintain that in both traditional Japanese and contemporary Japanese-American cultures, successfully carrying out the expectations placed on you is a means of giving back to the community (where "community" implies one's ethnic community). Proper fulfillment of one's role also fosters harmony, stability, and solidarity within the community or organization. In fact, the Japanese-American culture is said to discourage overt displays of individual power and self-aggrandizement as indicated by the election process described in the previous section. The president's words reveal her understanding that being a *Tomo* leader is not license to do as she pleases; rather, it requires a willingness to extend herself to serve the whole group:

> People need to understand that when you're in leadership positions you're not only the leader but we're gonna need you to do grunt work and be everybody's friend. It entails the whole spectrum. It's not just, "I'm the leader. I'm on top."

In maintaining consensus and harmony, the primacy of the group over the individual becomes evident. At times, harsh actions were taken to enforce this relationship as indicated by Takeshi. Given the drum corps' heavy performance schedule, there is a professional image for the group to maintain. Precision and focus also are integral components of *taiko*. So when the drummers are "screwing around," Takeshi implements the "Japanese culture of discipline." He leads the drummers in a brief time of *mokuso*, silent meditation, to focus their attention on the group's purpose.

While harmony did not always pervade, the value on group consensus among cabinet members remained strong. When selecting the cover design for the Cultural Night program, the cabinet was spilt. One member suggested taking a vote, at which time they all simultaneously began stating their own reasons for preferring one over the other. No formal vote was ever taken, but the discussion continued on until the group settled on one design. Even the most acrimonious discussions ended without any vocalized dissent; however, utterances of "OK, move on" or "I don't care; either one is fine" indicated lingering dissatisfaction. Nonetheless, conceding one's position in this way is not a sign of weakness. It is a culturally expected way of maintaining harmony.

These cultural norms are not adhered to at the expense of the group's well-being, however. When it came to ensuring a successful Cultural Night, personal opinions were expressed more freely. Last year's president Ellen and her predecessor Meg openly questioned Takeshi about dress rehearsals at a meeting. This could be considered evidence of the dominant culture's influence since Ellen is a fourth-generation Asian-American who characterizes her own upbringing as "mainstream American." But Meg is second generation and remains closely tied to Japanese culture. A more plausible explanation is that these two women represent the voice of experience. This was their fourth CN, while it was only Takeshi's second. This perspective was confirmed by a cabinet member who shared:

> They [Ellen and Meg] were very, very strong leaders. They used to control all of *Tomo*. They were holding back this year to give us the show. I think they're just being cautious now and they wanted to mention, "Hey Takeshi, you should have said people need to be here at this time, no excuses." They just wanted to reinforce that.

The experience and status of these former presidents legitimated their point of view. So while they momentarily broke from group consensus, their comments were accepted as beneficial to the immediate goal of presenting a CN in which everyone could take pride.

It is difficult to comprehend these students' willingness to submit to conditions of group consensus without recalling Nakane's (Kitano & Kikumura, 1980) explanation of institutional frames in Japanese culture. Organizational membership, whether it be in a family, club, or company, comprises the primary structure for one's life in Japan. This cultural notion remains strong among *Tomo* members:

> This is really like our family because most of the close friends we've made have stuck around. That's why it's so important that it [*Tomo*] was so small. Because you actually get to know people who come. Most of the cabinet are close friends of mine.

Many of the members joined the club early on in their freshmen year. *Tomo* served as their primary vehicle for adjusting to life on a large college campus. Thus, their lives as students in the larger university context is defined largely by being members of this group.

## Cultivating Ethnic Networks in the Community

Although *Tomo* is a student organization on one college campus, it actually belongs to a nested circle of Japanese-American communities. Basketball and bowling tournaments, Asian fraternity dances, Cultural Nights, community service projects in Little Tokyo, and participation in the nation-wide Japanese American Citizens League are examples of the channels through which these community ties are maintained.

The persistence of these "quasi-kin" relationships in the larger Japanese-American community has been identified as a primary mode of ethnic cohesion (Fugita & O'Brien, 1991). Cultivating these ties with the community is a primary responsibility of the club

president, and it reflects a culturally defined expectation of the group. For the past three years, *Tomo* has been led by women with unique abilities and resources to foster these connections. Meg, the 1992-93 president, was able to tap her contacts with traditional Japanese artists in the local community to establish the first student-run Cultural Night.

Utilizing an entirely different set of co-ethnic contacts, the 1993-94 president developed close links with other colleges' Japanese clubs. By coordinating invitational sports tournaments, Ellen closely aligned *Tomo* with groups at the major universities in two neighboring counties. She can quickly flip through her address book and spout names or phone numbers for contacts at other campuses.

This year's president Emi's forte appears to be in accessing a web of campus contacts beyond *Tomo*'s organizational boundaries. Emi is a university summer orientation coordinator and maintains a diverse group of friends who are active in the Asian Greek system and other ethnic organizations. In particular, her previous participation in the Pilipino student group helped *Tomo* immensely in getting music and dancers for CN.

Emi's brand of cultivating community ties represents a shift along the ethnic leadership continuum to a position reflecting movement away from adherence to a strict Japanese or Japanese-American culture. While Meg and Ellen focused on relationships with co-ethnics (i.e. Japanese), Emi has tapped into a broader pan-Asian and multi-racial network. Given the increasing outmarriage rate of Japanese-Americans and the relative decline in size of the Japanese-American population (Kitano, 1988), Emi's strategy appears necessary for the future of *Tomo*. Continued reliance on solely the Japanese-American "quasi-kin" networks cannot persist indefinitely. Furthermore, the ethnic

diversity among cabinet members indicates a shift in the composition and perhaps function of the club itself. Under these conditions, leadership practices shaped by Japanese-American cultural norms may no longer be appropriate. Rather, a pan-Asian or multicultural conceptualization may indeed be necessary.

To facilitate ties in the Asian-American community, the public relations vice presidency was created last year. This position was designed specifically to build relationships with the local Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) chapter and to provide representation within the university's Asian Pacific Students Association. Therefore, the goals and expectations for the individual holding this position reflect the value of cultivating ethnic networks. The woman elected to the position this year, Michele, was a natural because her father is a key member of JACL and is vice president of the county's Japanese American Association.

Other evidence of cabinet members' use of kinship ties comes through the experiences of Takeshi, the cultural VP. His Buddhist temple provided the costumes and props for Cultural Night's traditional dancers. Additionally, Takeshi's father is a faculty member at a local college which has one of the nation's few Asian-American presidents. Through individuals such as Michele and Takeshi, this small student organization maintains a significant presence in the collective Asian-American community.

## Summary

Based on the data analysis, an understanding emerged regarding the nature of leadership within this particular ethnic student organization. The organizational context of *Tomo* is bounded by students' reasons for joining the club: to gain an understanding of

Japanese and Japanese-American culture and to establish a social network of friends both on campus and in the larger ethnic community. Within this framework where students are seeking to establish their ethnic identity, leaders are needed who can facilitate the fulfillment of these expectations.

According to participants, effective leadership is caring and nurturing, yet also hierarchical. This model finds strong roots in Japanese-American culture where clear role definition and delineation of status is a group norm. At times, some cabinet members exercised practices more aligned with emergent paradigms of leadership. These included egalitarian treatment of all members and an emphasis on collaborative efforts. By drawing from their own cultural expectations and values as well as school-sponsored leadership training, these students demonstrated a leadership style which mirrored their own identities as products of a hybrid, blended, Asian-American culture. This phenomenon was not limited to participants of a particular generational status as initially anticipated. Each of them, even those who were not ethnically Japanese, adhered to a leadership style suiting the needs of *Tomo*, albeit to varying degrees. Their primary focus was culturally bound by the expectations to foster ethnic identification, cultivate ties within the ethnic community, and develop members' social networks.

## CONCLUSION

This study of one ethnic student organization demonstrates that leadership conceptualizations and practices tend to emerge from an interplay between cultural and contextual factors. The cultural sphere is shaped by students' upbringing as well as their involvement in the ethnic organization. As Asians growing up in America, their lives have

been shaped by the need to make sense of the push-pull dynamic of two, sometimes conflicting, cultures. Within *Tomo*, many of students have found for the first time a group of peers sharing this common experience. While the role of these ethnic enclaves in students' development is significant, questions emerge as to whether or not this ethnic segregation on campus hampers students' progress in the wider societal context awaiting them after graduation.

Of the students studied, only two participated in campus activities aimed at the student population as a whole. The others' extracurricular involvement was strictly limited to *Tomo* or to Asian-American activities. This scenario is perplexing given that each of them came from multi-ethnic or predominantly white high school environments where they claimed to have had ethnically heterogeneous groups of friends. Only in college did their social lives begin to revolve around their ethnicity. Certainly, issues of ethnic identity are at play here as evidenced by their decision to join *Tomo*. Perhaps the impetus lies in the high number of Asian-American students on campus. Or, despite the presence of students of the same race, they may still feel like institutional outsiders given the few Asian-American faculty, administrators, and curricular offerings reflecting their experiences. Future studies need to examine the role of these various influences on students' ethnic identity development and on college adjustment.

For the student leaders examined in this study, enactment of a culturally blended leadership style was appropriate given the organizational context. However, it is clear that some culturally-influenced values such as maintaining group consensus and harmony, retreating from individual power and self-glory, and emphasis on cultivating ethnic

community networks are not beneficial to their advancement as leaders in non Asian-American contexts. The larger society emphasizes and rewards leaders who exhibit behaviors representing the opposite qualities.

Therefore, while these students ably serve as leaders in campus ethnic enclaves, they are rarely recognized as leaders in their subsequent workplaces or in the American political system. Opportunities to be leaders within the Japanese American Citizens League, Asian-American community centers, or other ethnic organizations will be abundant; but the glass ceiling may still linger in institutions under the purview of the dominant culture. From the perspective of this study's participants, the reality of this situation is made clear through their inability to name Asian-American role models other than their parents. Only one informant identified someone other than a parent. Without visible Asian-American leaders in the fields these students intend to pursue, they question the feasibility of attaining their professional goals.

So while the growing contingent of Asian-American students in higher education can benefit from leadership development opportunities, it is questionable whether the experiences gained in enclave-type ethnic organizations are valued in the larger society. Leadership notions and practices which are ethnically bound constitute an area of study which is virtually untouched. Comparative work on Asian-American students who participate in multi-ethnic organizations would also further our understanding in this area.

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# APPENDIX A

**ASIAN AMERICAN LEADERSHIP:**
**PARTICIPANT PROFILE**

Please answer the following questions as they pertain to you.

1. Name (please print): _____
(last) (first) (middle)

2. Gender (please circle): Male Female

3. Date of birth: _____/_____/_____ 4. Place of birth: _____
(month) (day) (year) (city) (state) (country)

5. Your ethnic background: _____ 6. Generation in U.S.: _____

7. Language(s) you speak with your family: _____

8. Parents' primary language: mother: _____
father: _____

9. Racial composition of the neighborhood you grew up in (check one):
_____ Majority Asians of same ethnic group
_____ Majority Asians of various ethnic groups
_____ Majority Caucasian
_____ Majority African-American
_____ Majority Latino
_____ Majority other racial group
_____ No majority group
(please specify racial groups present: _____)

10a. Growing up, how often did you interact with others (non-relatives) of the same ethnic group? (check one that most closely represents your situation):
_____ Never
_____ Less than once a month
_____ Once a month
_____ Once or twice a week
_____ Daily or almost daily

10b. Please indicate the situations in which you interacted with people of the same ethnic group (check all applicable):

_____ Regular school
_____ Asian Language school
_____ Christian organization
_____ Buddhist organization
_____ Other religious organization
_____ Athletic organization or league
_____ Ethnic cultural activity
(e.g. dance, calligraphy, music, tea ceremony)
_____ Other cultural activity, not ethnically oriented
_____ Ethnic events
(e.g. festivals, lectures, rallies)
_____ Informal gathering
_____ Other (please specify: _____)

11. To what extent were you exposed to the following elements of your ethnic background while growing up? (circle one number for each item):

| | Item | Never | Infrequently | Occasionally | Frequently |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. | Food | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| b. | Language | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| c. | Values | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| d. | Customs | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |

12. How would you characterize your upbringing? (check one):

_____ Mainstream American
_____ Blend of Asian and American elements
_____ Traditional Asian
_____ Other: _____

13a. Year in college (circle one):
1 2 3 4 5 >5

13b. Year at UCI (circle one):
1 2 3 4 5 >5

14. Where do you currently live? (check one):

_____ At home with family
_____ Residence hall
_____ Other on-campus housing
_____ Off-campus apartment
_____ Sorority/Fraternity house
_____ Other: _____

15. How long have you been involved with *Tomo No Kai*? _____

16. What other organizations or activities do you participate in on campus?

_____
_____
_____
_____

17. Do you hold/have you held any positions in any of these organizations including *Tomo*?

| Organization | Position |
| --- | --- |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |

18. Please feel free to make any additional comments:

Thank you for your cooperation.